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SOVIET SAID TO GET ORBIT VIEW OF WAR

Rusians Launch Satellites
—U.S. May Be Watching

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

The Soviet Union has orbited four reconnaissance satellites in less than two weeks, an unusual launching rate that is being interpreted in Washington as evidence of Soviet efforts to monitor the Middle East war almost continuously with cameras.

The frequency with which the satellites are launched and then brought back to earth could give the Soviet military valuable tactical information on Israeli land, sea and air forces as well as on movements of the United States fleet in the Mediterranean, according to informed sources in Washington.

It was not known whether any of the information is being passed on to the Arabs.

American observers of Soviet space activities recalled that similar "quick-look" reconnaissance satellites were deployed during the India-Pakistan war in December, 1971.

U.S. Could Be Active

The United States could be receiving photographs of the Middle Eastern conflict from an Air Force Agena satellite that was launched on Sept. 27 from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. A more advanced American reconnaissance satellite, launched on July 13, could also be monitoring the area, although the satellite is thought to be approaching the end of its lifetime.

The Air Force will not discuss the operations or results of its secret satellites.

Following a long-standing practice, the Soviet Union gives its reconnaissance satellites the Cosmos designation, a broad label also applied to experimental payloads, some scientific missions and failed planetary probes. About two of the reconnaissance satellites are launched a month, each remaining in orbit 10 to 14 days.

According to tracking data provided by the Goddard Space Flight Center at Greenbelt, Md., the first Soviet satellite that could have observed the Middle East was Cosmos 596, which was launched Oct. 3 — three days before the outbreak of war between the Arabs and the Israelis. Whether the timing was a coincidence or an indication of advanced notice of the fighting could not be determined.

Cosmos Returns Early

But Cosmos 596 was commanded to return to earth on Oct. 9—three days after the war began and six to eight days earlier than usual.

The Soviet reconnaissance satellites, weighing about 5,000 pounds, are known to be variations of the Vostoks used for early manned space flights, including the pioneering orbital flight of Yuri A. Gagarin in 1961. The exposed film is returned with the entire spacecraft, which comes down in the Soviet land recovery area near Karaganda in Kazakhstan.

American reconnaissance satellites are capable of releasing capsules of exposed film for return to earth. It is thus possible for a satellite to remain in orbit longer and release several capsules at regular intervals. They are returned to the Pacific Ocean, where they are picked up by Air Force planes just before they splash down.

Others Are Launched

On the day the war broke out, a second Soviet satellite, Cosmos 597, was sent into orbit. It, too, was returned after only six days.

A third satellite, Cosmos 598, was launched on Oct. 10 and is still in orbit. The fourth satellite, Cosmos 599, was launched on Monday.

One reliable source in Washington said that the satellites were "definitely" reconnaissance vehicles of the "recoverable type." Their orbits are such that they could pass over the Middle East several times in a mission at altitudes of 122 to 200 miles.

From such a vantage point, the source said, the Russians could gather "tactical or near-tactical information — such things as order of battle, truck and tank movements, types of aircraft on airfields and the number of ships in harbors."

Commenting on the Soviet space surveillance, Soviet Aerospace, a weekly newsletter published in Washington, said:

"During the India-Pakistan War operation, one of the satellites was returned in 5 days, the next in 6 days, the next in 11 days, and the last in 10 days. The duration of standard operational Soviet recon/survey satellites was then, and is now, on the order of 12 or more days.

"While the India-Pakistan War space surveillance was the first full-scale use of reconnaissance/surveillance satellite systems for keeping a fleet under continuous observation, this will be the first time that a full-scale war has been placed under continuous space surveillance. Further, it could possibly also represent the first use of the system by the Soviets to provide combat information to their allies."

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